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CONTACT: Al Jaeger
(701) 328-2900

JAEGER TO TAKE PART IN DISCUSSIONS ON NATIONAL ELECTION REFORM

Bismarck, N.D. - Secretary of State Al Jaeger is on his way to Washington, D.C. next week to take part in discussions concerning national election reform. The discussions will be the emphasis of the winter meeting of the National Association of Secretaries of State (NASS) scheduled for February 7-12.

The National Association of Secretaries of State, to which Jaeger belongs, represents a majority of the nation's chief election officials. The association has played a key roll in shaping discussions on national election reform and in influencing the content and scope of legislation making its way through congress.

Jaeger's visit to Washington, D.C. may also coincide with the consideration of comprehensive election reform legislation that will be making its way to the Senate floor as early as next week. Senate Bill No. 565, known as the "Equal Protection of the Voting Rights Act of 2001," sets out a multitude of changes and requirements intended to improve voting systems and procedures and the way elections are conducted.

The bill also carries with it a hefty price tag exceeding \$3.5 billion, said Jaeger, some of which will have to be picked up by state and local jurisdictions. Jaeger, like other Secretaries of State, is most concerned that Congress will approve legislation but fail to appropriate the necessary funding to cover all of the requirements and mandates included.

"Regardless of their goals and good intentions to improve our nation's electoral system, doing this will place the financial burden on us, state government, and worse our counties," said Jaeger. "This is of great concern to me because we simply can't afford it here in North Dakota."

One of the bill's provisions would require every voting precinct in the country to be equipped with a voting device allowing voters to correct their ballots for errors like over voting, under voting, and cross party voting. These voting devices would also be required to provide unassisted access to the voting process for persons having broad and diverse disabilities.

"For North Dakota, this could easily be more than a million dollars," said Jaeger.

Other provisions of the bill include the establishment of a new federal agency to oversee election administration; requiring states to implement a specific provisional voting process ensuring voters are not turned away at the polls for lack of appearing on voter lists; and setting voluntary standards for voting equipment.

In December, the U.S. House of Representatives approved its version of bipartisan election reform in the form of the "Help Americans Vote Act of 2001." The legislation passed in the House with an 85% favorable vote and will likely meet up with the Senate's version in conference committee in the weeks to come.

"Whatever the final result," said Jaeger, "The legislation needs to work for North Dakota and include the necessary funding to cover all mandates."

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